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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly overviews the economic and social conditions of the 11 million Black children and youth in the United States in the 1970s. Directions for social action are suggested and the aims of the National Black Child Development Institute are indicated. (RH)

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BLACK CHILDREN: SOME HIGHLIGHTS ON THEIR STATUS

Presented for

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In this International Year of the Child, and in honor of National Black Child Development Week, it is appropriate that the National Black Child Development Institute, an organization devoted to advocacy on behalf of Black children and their families, issue this statement highlighting the status of Black children in America. Since its inception in 1970, NBCDI has continued to identify and support those public policies and programs that further the goal of achieving full physical, emotional, cognitive and social development for every Black child. In this special year of the child, NBCDI wishes to reaffirm its commitment to the full development of all children, but particularly Black children.

Today there are almost eight million Black children under the age of sixteen. They constitute more than one third of the approximately twenty-five million Black Americans in this country. In addition, there are another three million or so Black teenagers and youth between the ages of sixteen to twenty-one who deserve our special attention. It is to the special needs, nurturance, education, development and general well being of these children and youth that we must recommit ourselves. They are our future.

The children and youth of Black America are scattered throughout the towns and cities of this nation. Most are in the highly concentrated central cities of our urban centers. More than forty percent are in low-income families. Between 1976 and 1977 alone, the number of low-income Black families increased by 20,000; since 1975, the number has increased by almost 125,000. Black families are three times as likely to be living in poverty as their majority race counterparts. For these families, there is less and often insufficient money to buy decent food, clothing, shelter, health services and all of the other things that make for a decent life in our urban, industrialized society.

Recent statistics indicate that only about fifty percent of Black children and youth live in families where both parents are present. Somewhat more than forty percent live in families where the mother only is present. While female-headed households with children present are on the increase for all families, the increase among Black families has been far more dramatic. These female-headed families are substantially more likely to live in poverty than their non-female-headed counterparts. Particularly dramatic is a recent statistic which indicates that forty-nine percent of Black female-headed households are below the poverty level, compared to twenty-eight percent of all Black families and only nine percent of all white families. However, over the last few years the economic situation of all Black families - female and non-female-headed - has deteriorated relative to that of majority race headed families.

The opportunity of every Black child to achieve full emotional, physical, cognitive and social development depends initially on the ability to survive the early days and months of life itself. But at birth a Black child can still expect to live less long than a white child. The infant and neonatal mortality rates for Black babies remain substantially higher than for white babies. In 1974, for example, twenty-five of every one thousand babies, compared with fifteen of every thousand white babies, died within the first year of life. Similarly, Black babies are more likely to die within the first twenty-eight days of birth than are white babies. These statistics, to be sure, speak to the need to provide better nutritional information and prenatal care for mothers and increased access to health care services for their babies.

While strong, economically secure families and access to our health care services and institutions remain important, early childhood day care institutions have become increasingly important and necessary to the full development of

our children. Nursery schools and kindergartens have become increasingly important institutions as fewer working parents live in extended family networks and the number of working mothers increases. Thus, for example, between 1964 and 1974, the number of Black three and four year olds enrolled in kindergarten increased from about 65,000 to 243,000. Those numbers represent a jumb from five percent of the Black three and four year olds to twenty percent of that population.

In America, the quantity and quality of schooling has much to do with determining future life chances, opportunities and quality of life. This is especially true for Blacks. More of our children, but not enough, are in school and staying longer. For Black male youth between the ages of twenty to twenty-four, the proportion completing high school increased from fifty-nine percent in 1970 to seventy percent in 1976; for young females the increase was from sixty-two percent to seventy-four percent. But stated differently, in 1976, thirty percent of our male youth and twenty-six percent of our female youth had not completed high school.

More young people are completing college but we still lag behind the majority population in that respect. In 1970, only six percent of males twenty-five to twenty-nine had completed college; by 1976 it was still only eleven percent compared to thirty-four percent for white youth.

There are many other statistics which could be highlighted in a report of this kind. But we think there are some important issues that need special attention and so we have focused our attention on them and their policy implications.

The quality of life for Black children, as it may be measured by statistics in health, education, housing, family arrangements, and in other areas as well, will in large part be determined by the conditions and opportunities

afforded them by their families. Thus, any efforts on behalf of Black children must focus special attention on their adult providers -- the families who nurture them. To improve the quality of life for our children we must improve the economic opportunities and conditions of their providers. Jobs and decent, non-poverty level incomes are the key to those improvements. In those crucial areas of employment and income, Black families continue to fare less well than their majority race counterparts. The 1977 median income for Black families was $9,563 compared to $16,740 for white families. Since 1975, the ratio of Black to white family income has declined from sixty-two percent to fifty-seven percent. The jobless rate among all Blacks remains more than twice as high as the rate among whites. The economic crisis in the Black community remains at a depression level. Thus it is important that we continue to support the efforts of groups like the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus and the Urban Coalition, which advocate the provision of full employment and higher incomes for Black and other low-income minorities.

We must also support a range of economic and social policies which assist in keeping two parent families intact while simultaneously advocating those policies which lend special support for the increasing number of female-headed families.

With the large number of Black mothers who must work it is especially important that we continue to advocate public policies that provide increased access to in-home, extended family and institutional day care.

But because some Black children, more than 200,000, still have no permanent homes, we must continue to advocate public policies and citizen involvement to promote the adoption of Black children by the Black families who can

nurture them. The NBCDI Black Child Adoption Technical Assistance Project (1975-77) has already demonstrated that organized action groups can play an important role in solving the problems of Black children in need of permanent homes. Local advocacy groups do succeed in increasing the number of placements of Black children with Black adoptive families.

We as parents and advocates for Black children must work to improve our schools and the quality of education available to our children. And we must continue to encourage our children to stay in school. We must work to ensure that an educational credential in the hands of a Black child is as good as and as respected as a credential in the hands of any other child.

The problem of teenage employment deserves special attention. Work is both an important economic and an education source of support for a teenager. Many work because of a need to support their own livelihood as well as to provide for their families. For others, employment is an integral part of an educational experience that prepares the individual for future roles in society through the development of attitudes and behaviors that shape performance in adult life.

Unemployment remains, however, a persistent problem for Black teenagers. It has increased over the past several years and is today still at an all-time high. Black and white youths with similar skills and amounts of education have radically dissimilar unemployment rates. For Black male teenagers, umemployment is likely to be eight times higher than their white counterparts. To prepare our youth to assume responsible roles in adulthood, we must continue to stress the role of education and employment, to advocate policies that reduce youth unemployment, as well as policies directed at an elimination of racial discrimination.

Over the coming year, NBCDI will continue to work for public policies, public education to issues, and programs which impact in positive ways on the lives of Black children. But changes in public policies, public awareness and the development of new programs require work on a number of fronts, from national to grass root levels. NBCDI's special role over the coming year will be to continue to work to strengthen the developing network of leaders and community groups concerned about these issues and, above all, about the welfare of our children and youth.

In addition, the National Black Child Development Institute will continue to participate in initiatives directed at welfare reform; increased publicly supported day care; broad based national health insurance; and major revisions in our existing adoption subsidy policies and practices. NBCDI will also continue to monitor plans for the forthcoming White House Conference on Families to ensure that the concerns of Black families delineated in this paper are substantially addressed.

Note: The statistics used in this paper to highlighlight the status of Black children are drawn from a variety of reports and summaries issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau, the National Urban League, the National Center for Educational Statistics and the National Black Child Development Institute.

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